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Reporter and scientific stubborn pursuit of

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Judging
journalism

The wide worlds of journalism, global intelligence and diplomacy collided with a narrow, highly specialized scientific world last week.

The locale was a Minnesota News Council hearing. On the docket was a complaint against the St. Paul Dispatch brought by Chester J. Mirocha, a plant pathology professor at the University of Minnesota's St. Paul campus.

The intricacies of Mirocha's subject exceed the grasp of most people. But everyone can comprehend the chronicle of American spies and Communist perfidy that underlies his complaint.

The episode also involves a reticent Philadelphia scientist who acted as an undercover intermediary for the State Department in connection with a hush-hush investigation of clues to "yellow rain" warfare conducted by the Soviets and the Vietnamese.

Professor Mirocha, an internationally renowned mycotoxin expert, is a rather private person who had never dealt with a reporter before this story broke.

His antagonist is 26-year-old Jeann Linsley, a personally shy but professionally aggressive reporter. She joined the Dispatch last July from her first job at the Bay City (Mich.) Times. She also had a three-month internship in 1978 on the staff of Jack Anderson, the muckraking syndicated columnist.

The issue boiled down to whether she and her editors owed Mirocha an apology, both for flaws in a Sept. 28 front-page story, "U professor made secret tests for biological warfare agents," and the relentless techniques she used to get her story.

The key word in the headline is "secret."

For if, in fact, Mirocha had knowingly done secret testing of leaf and stem samples found last March by U.S. intelligence operatives in Cambodia near the Thai border, he would have violated university policy against unauthorized secret work. His indignant denial of any impropriety frames the issue now before the News Council.

The fact is that a young reporter had a piece of what one council member called "one hell of a story" about a controversy still boiling in Washington, Moscow and points

thrust upon him by no less a public figure than Secretary of State Alexander Haig.

In a speech in Berlin on Sept. 13, Haig made a stunning charge: that confirmation had been found for reports that the Soviet Union and the Vietnamese were using lethal toxic agents known as mycotoxins, which are organically produced poisons.

Any allegation of what's loosely called chemical warfare sets off an international sensation. In this instance, the Soviet Union denounced Haig's charges as "a big lie" geared to win support for President Reagan's plan to resume production of U.S. chemical weapons. Just this week, the CIA leaked a story that it had more hard and "grotesque" evidence that the Soviet Union used chemical warfare—including "yellow rain"—to kill up to 30,000 people in Southeast Asia and Afghanistan.

Haig's chief evidence was an analysis of the Cambodian leaf and stem sample, which showed certain mycotoxins linked to the effects of yellow rain. That's a reference to the yellow powder in which the poisons were reportedly released from airplanes. Poisons of this kind cause vomiting, itching, blisters, internal hemorrhaging and, ultimately, death. Instances of this have been reported from Cambodia, Laos and Afghanistan.

Who made the analysis?

At first the State Department said that much of the information about the project was classified. Yet, two days later, on Sept. 15, news service stories from Washington said government officials indicated the test was made by a Minnesota researcher whom they refused to identify.

Now the scene shifts to St. Paul.

Enter, like gang busters, Jeann Linsley.

She and another reporter, armed with the cryptic account from Washington, followed the trail to Mirocha, tracking him down in Egypt, where he was conducting a scientific seminar. After eight calls to Cairo, Linsley finally reached Mirocha.

Depending on your viewpoint, it could be said that while the professor was snotty, the reporter was sassy.

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